

**A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS
OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS'
OPINIONS OF WHOLE GROUP
AND ABILITY GROUP
READING INSTRUCTION**

MASTER'S PROJECT

**Submitted to the Department of Elementary
Education, University of Dayton, in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
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by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose for the Study

Since the beginning of formal education there has been a controversy as to which is the best method of reading instruction: whole group or ability grouping. Research in this area has a long history. Few educational practices have been scrutinized by researchers and reviewers for a longer period of time. (Kulik & Kulik 1992) However, very few conclusions have emerged. Some researchers support ability grouping; others support whole group instruction and still others are undecided as to which is the best method. The question seems to be, "Which method do teachers prefer for their students?"

Ability grouping has been used in many American schools since 1927. Intelligence testing was used to place students in homogeneous groups by intelligence. Ability grouping was brought into schools practically overnight and still remains in many schools today. (Davis, 1991)

Ability grouping is a subject of great controversy, despite its widespread use. Critics argue that ability grouping has harmful social consequences for students placed in lower ability groups. (Gamoran, 1984)

Most reading instruction occurs at the elementary level. (Harris & Harrison, 1988) Therefore, the writer was concerned with which elements determine whether or not students learn to read well. Since the young students are more dependent on the teacher to learn than older students, it is important for the teacher to be confident in the method he or she is using to teach reading.

The writer surveyed a sample of elementary educators who have taught reading using both the whole group and ability group reading methods. The writer analyzed their opinions of both methods and determined if these elementary educators preferred one method of reading instruction over the other.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to analyze the opinions of elementary school educators who have taught reading by using two different methods: whole group or ability grouping.

Assumptions

In order to conduct this study a Likert-type survey was used to gather and analyze the opinions of elementary educators toward whole group and ability group reading instruction. The writer assumed the questionnaire obtained the information needed to complete the study. The writer assumed that the instrument was reliable. The writer assumed that the teachers completing the instrument answered honestly and in such a manner which reflects their personal experiences using the two types of reading instruction: whole group and ability grouping.

Limitations

One of the limitations to this study was the inability to survey more elementary educators. The sample size consisted of only twenty-five teachers. Another limitation was the difference in years of experience the educators have had using whole group and ability grouped reading instruction.

Definition of Terms

Ability Grouping - is the grouping of students for instruction by ability or achievement with the purpose of reducing group heterogeneity.

Whole Group Instruction - means all students learn the same material together despite differences in ability or achievement scores.

Flexible Grouping - is placing all students in temporary groups based on their level of independence as learners. These groups are formed and reformed to engage in a variety of tasks.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

(In this chapter the review of related literature is written. It is divided into four sections.)

Principles Supporting Whole Group Reading Instruction

One of the principles supporting whole group reading instruction is that it allows teachers more time to spend on instruction than on behavior management. According to Gamoran (1992), problem solving and critical thinking are more likely to occur in higher level classes than lower level classes. The students in the lower level classes tend to have lessons that are fragmented, emphasize seat work and recitation. This allows them to become less interested, distracted and off task. The lessons in a lower level classroom may be less engaging and offer more opportunities for misbehavior.

In primary classrooms where reading groups exist, it is important for the classroom teacher to find methods of keeping the students busy while she works with one of the small groups. This method is usually seatwork. While seatwork offers a good review of some skills, it may become tedious and repetitive for the students. The students may lack interest in this. The teacher may find his or herself concentrating more on managing the class than on how well the students in the group are performing. Berghoff and Egawa (1991) wrote a second principle in support of whole group reading instruction. They feel whole group reading instruction allows students to make connections and learn to support each other. The students are a community--each one is unique and equally valuable to his or her community. If children are given the opportunity to work as a group it will allow them to each be an active participant in their

classroom community and enable them to prepare to be a member of our adult society in which we live our life.

School is a social environment. It is where children learn to interact with each other on a day to day basis. Reading and writing are social aspects of human life. It is how we communicate with each other on a day to day basis. If children learn as a whole group in school during reading and writing they will be able to interact and communicate more effectively with each other.

A child relies on his or her parents and family to learn how to function in his world. A child relies on his or her teachers to learn how to be academically successful in his school career. The teachers play a major role in a child's learning experience. However, children also learn from each other. Children who are good in an area help others who are not; older children help younger children who in turn help children even younger than them. When children of different ages, maturity levels and ability levels work together everyone learns.

"Literacy is a life-learning process which children are engaged in regardless of their differing abilities or backgrounds. Schools must be a forum where children can express and negotiate meanings, where each child is engaged and supported in grouping toward an understanding of his or her power to participate in the community. Then the knowledge gained can be functional and meaningful." (Berthoff & Egawa, 1991)

Principles Supporting Ability Group Reading

One of the principles in support of ability grouping is that grouping students for reading instruction raises students' attentiveness. (Jongsma, 1991; Harris & Harrison,

1988) If the children work with a teacher in a small group, they are more likely to receive individualized instruction. When they receive more attention from their teacher, they are more likely to pay close attention to the task and skills they are learning.

If the children are in one large group for reading instruction, those who are on a higher level of reading may become distracted or bored when a lower reading level student is reading. This may cause more discipline problems for the teacher and make the child feel less adequate.

A second principle in support of ability grouping is that it allows teachers to work with a smaller number of students. (Jongsma, 1991; Masland, 1990) If the teachers are working with small groups, they may be able to provide a more stimulating environment for the children to work in. Placing the children in groups may allow the teacher to optimize students' learning.

If the children read in one large group, they will be ensured less involvement in reading the text aloud. They will also receive less feedback from the teacher on their oral reading skills. The teacher will be unable to take time out to provide on-the-spot word analysis instruction to the student who is having difficulty.

Additionally, if students read in small groups they will be provided with more opportunities to answer comprehensive questions. They will also be able to ask more questions. Small group questioning allows the teacher to collect more diagnostic information from each reader.

Dana & Markle, 1991; Masland, 1990; Young, 1990; Mills & Durden, 1992; and Davis, 1991 all identified a third principle in support of ability grouping. Grouping

the students is the best way to meet a student's individual needs. If the students are grouped by ability the teacher can prepare lessons appropriate for each group. The lessons, instructional level and pace are adapted to student performance levels. This results in significant positive achievement effects for students.

Ability grouping not only acknowledges different students' needs but it may provide more on-task, direct instruction some students need to acquire skills needed for reading. Students do not progress at the same rate, especially in reading, and should not be expected to read out of the same book. In whole group instruction, we may accept the probability that some students will find what we are doing too difficult while others will not be challenged.

Criticisms of Ability Grouping

Dana and Markle (1991) wrote a criticism of ability grouping. The first criticism is that often the grouping of students is a reflection of the family's socioeconomic status more than the child's ability or potential to learn. The students are grouped very early in their schools career--usually kindergarten or first grade. This oftentimes results in the child being placed according to his social status. Those who are in the higher socioeconomic status receive favored treatment, more frequent and more positive interaction with the teachers. The child's status is usually enhanced in second and third grade. The higher status children usually stay together as an elite group. So often there is little change in assigned ability groups after the third grade, regardless of the child's ability.

A second criticism of ability grouping, as stated by Dana and Markle (1991) and

Weaver (1990), is that teachers set different expectations for the high group than they do for the low group. It has been found that teachers overreact to grouping labels, so their teaching is not appropriately matched to student ability levels. The teachers working with the lower level students tend to have inappropriately low expectations for them.

Once students have been placed in a particular group, the teachers tend to teach to the group rather than to individuals within the group. The teacher's expectations for the group undoubtedly influence the instructional procedures used. An effective teacher needs to have high expectations for each student. The children also need to have high expectations for themselves. Students tend to achieve at the levels teachers expect of them.

A third criticism of ability grouping is that it lowers a student's self-esteem. (Dana & Markle, 1991; Berghoff & Egawa 1991; Young, 1990; Worthington, 1991; Gamoran, 1984) It has been found that a child's self-esteem is closely tied to their placement in the classroom hierarchy of reading groups. Those in the middle and lower groups quickly feel they are less able than the students in the high group. These students may become discouraged about their progress and their capabilities and therefore are less motivated to learn.

Ability grouping may lead to stereotyped and stratified roles, and parental, teacher, and peer pressures that could prevent the student from developing healthy social relations and a positive self-esteem.

According to Worthington (1991) and Davis (1991), a fourth criticism of ability grouping is that once a child is placed in a group it is usually a permanent placement,

that is, once a "bluebird" always a "bluebird". Most children are placed in ability groups during their primary years, usually in first grade. The students usually remain in these groups regardless of their individual differences in growth. An early placement into a reading group can have a major effect on students since the group pace and instruction can influence achievement and attitudes. The children placed in the low groups stay in those groups and learn at a slower rate than their ability warrants.

The gap between the low and high ability groups widens as time goes on. When the students are in high school, the children in the first grade low group tend to be enrolled in the vocational track classes and those in the high group tend to be enrolled in the college prep classes. The instructors tend to lock students into one group without much hope of progressing to a higher group throughout their school career.

Alternative Methods For Grouping In Reading Instruction

One alternative method for reading instruction is flexible grouping. (Harp, 1989; Davis, 1991) In flexible grouping children are placed in temporary groups based on their level of independence as learners. The children are grouped on a continuum from highly independent to highly dependent learners. The students engage in a variety of tasks. The groups are formed and reformed depending on the task. The groups remain until the purpose of the task is achieved and then new groups are formed. This adds variety and interest to the lessons.

Harp (1989) has identified a set of principles that guide the use of flexible groups:

- (1) There are no permanent groups.
- (2) Groups are created to meet the needs as they arise.

- (3) At times there is only one group consisting of all pupils.
- (4) Groups vary in size from two or three to nine or ten.
- (5) Group membership is not fixed.
- (6) Pupil commitment is enhanced when students know how the group's work relates to the overall program or task.
- (7) Children should be able to evaluate the progress of the group and the teacher's assessment of the group's work.
- (8) There should be a clear strategy for supervising the group's work.

Harp (1989), and Mills and Durden (1992) have concluded that a second alternative method for reading instruction is cooperative learning. In cooperative learning the teacher begins by teaching a task to the entire class. When the children show an understanding of the concept, they are divided into heterogeneous teams of four or five to practice the skill, study and complete an activity or project. These groups work together as a team and are rewarded on the basis of the group's overall performance. Cooperative learning activities offer incentives for group effort and not just to the individual.

The idea of cooperative learning is to motivate individuals to help their group members to learn. Each member has a job or responsibility to the group. The only way for the group to be successful is for everyone to do their job and make sure every member succeeds at learning. Cooperation is highlighted and competition is eliminated.

It has been proven that children learn best from each other. Cooperative learning allows them to learn from each other in a safe environment. Cooperative learning also

helps build self-esteem, promotes better intergroup relationships and develops better attitudes toward learning.

A third alternative method for reading instruction is interest grouping. (Young, 1990) Children of differing ability have an opportunity to work together. The students are placed in groups based on their common interests in reading materials. When the children are allowed to read material they are interested in, it motivates them to learn and develops a better attitude toward school and reading. Interest grouping gives the students an opportunity to apply what they are learning to their reading program.

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURE

Subjects

Thirty subjects were randomly chosen for this study. Each elementary teacher listed in the employee index was asked to fill out a questionnaire. The educators range from kindergarten to fifth grade teachers. The subjects' years of experience range from one to thirty years. The educational levels of the subjects vary from teachers with a bachelors degree to those with a masters degree plus thirty hours. All of the subjects have taught using whole group and ability group reading instruction.

Setting

School. The school where the survey was conducted is a public elementary school in central Ohio. The building employs twenty-five classroom teachers, two Chapter One reading teachers, two Severely Learning Disabled teachers and one Learning Disabled tutor. The building under study enrolls an average of six hundred and fifty students in grades kindergarten through fifth.

Community. The school involved in the study is located in a suburban area in central Ohio. The area is a low-economic area employing mostly blue-collar workers in its many industries. The area also has several large farms. Many of the students live in apartments surrounding the school. This has led the district to become a transient area.

Data Collection

Construction of the Data Collection Instrument. The instrument was constructed by the writer using information gathered from the review of related literature

to establish content validity. The instrument was a Likert-type questionnaire that addressed both the ability group and whole group reading instruction methods. The instrument consisted of twenty statements, ten related to the ability group reading instruction method and ten related to the whole group reading instruction method. Teachers were asked to respond to each statement as to whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. (See pages 14, 15, and 16)

Administration of the Data Collection Instrument. The instrument was given to each elementary educator for them to answer at their own discretion. The instrument was returned to the writer one week later. The writer then analyzed the responses provided by twenty educators and completed the results.

March 11, 1994

Dear Colleagues,

I am conducting a survey among the teachers in our building. The survey will involve a questionnaire for volunteers to complete. The questionnaire has questions concerning whole group reading instruction and ability group reading instruction. I would appreciate your comments on this survey. The questionnaire is strictly voluntary and confidential.

I would like to define the two methods used in the questionnaire:

whole group instruction is when all of the students learn the same material together despite differences in ability or achievement scores.

ability grouping is the grouping of students for instruction by ability or achievement with the purpose of reducing group heterogeneity.

If you would like to participate in the survey please return your completed questionnaire to me by March 18, 1994.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Robin Hedrick

TEACHER OPINIONS OF WHOLE GROUP AND ABILITY GROUP READING

Instructions: Please respond to each question. In each instance, circle the response that represents your true opinion. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answer is correct if it expresses your true opinion.

SA	You strongly agree with the Statement.
A	You generally agree with the Statement, but have some reservations.
D	You generally disagree with the Statement.
SD	You strongly disagree with the Statement.

1. Whole group reading instruction allows the teacher more time to spend on instructions than on behavior management.
SA A D SD
2. Whole group reading instruction eliminates "busy work".
SA A D SD
3. Ability grouping raises students' attentiveness during reading.
SA A D SD
4. Ability grouping allows more individualized instruction time.
SA A D SD
5. Ability grouping allows the teacher to optimize students' learning.
SA A D SD
6. Whole group reading instruction allows students to make connections and learn to support each other.
SA A D SD
7. Whole group instruction enables each student to be an active participant in their classroom community.
SA A D SD
8. Whole group reading instruction teaches children to interact and communicate more effectively with each other.
SA A D SD

9. Using small groups to teach reading eliminates behavior problems.
SA A D SD
10. Ability grouping offers students more feedback from the teacher on their progress.
SA A D SD
11. Reading in small groups allows students more opportunities to ask and answer comprehensive questions.
SA A D SD
12. Whole group reading instruction encourages children to learn from each other.
SA A D SD
13. Ability grouping for reading establishes an instructional level and pace appropriate for each students' performance level.
SA A D SD
14. Ability grouping provides more on-task, direct instruction of reading skills.
SA A D SD
15. Children are only grouped, in ability grouped classrooms, according to their ability level.
SA A D SD
16. Whole group reading instruction allows the teacher to set high expectations for the whole class.
SA A D SD
17. Using whole group reading instruction eliminates labeling.
SA A D SD
18. Whole group reading instruction builds students' self-concepts.
SA A D SD
19. Working with small groups of children enables the teacher to provide a more stimulating learning environment for the students.
SA A D SD
20. Whole group reading instruction narrows the gap between high and low ability groups.
SA A D SD

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Presentation of the Results

Two tables are used to present the percentage results of the Likert-type questionnaire. (See Table one page 17 and table two page 18). Table one shows the percentage responses to the instrument statements which are related to the ability group method. Table two shows the percentage responses to the statements which are related to the whole group method. Each table consists of ten statements addressing each method of reading instruction.

Discussion of the Results

The writer received twenty completed questionnaires to analyze. Her conclusions were based on the percentage scores from Table one and two. The writer combined the strongly agreed and agreed percentage scores to complete the results. The writer also combined the disagreed and strongly disagreed percentage scores to form her calculations.

TABLE I
Teacher Preference of
Reading Instruction:
Ability Grouping

Survey Questions	Percentages			
	SA	A	D	SD
Ability grouping raises students' attentiveness during reading.	11	47	26	16
Ability grouping allows more individualized instruction time.	21	47	32	0
Ability grouping allows the teacher to optimize student learning.	15	40	35	10
Using small groups to teach reading eliminates behavior problems.	05	20	55	20
Ability grouping offers students more feedback from the teacher on their progress.	32	26	42	0
Reading in small groups allows students more opportunities to ask and answer comprehensive questions.	32	37	26	05
Ability grouping for reading establishes an instructional level and pace appropriate for each student's performance level.	37	37	16	10
Ability grouping provides more on-task, direct instruction of reading skills.	32	32	31	05
Children are only grouped, in ability grouped classrooms, according to their ability level.	05	58	21	16
Working with small groups of children enables the teacher to provide a more stimulating learning environment for the students.	10	30	50	10

TABLE II
Teacher Preference of
Reading Instruction:
Whole Group Instructional Method

Survey Questions	Percentages			
	SA	A	D	SD
Whole group reading instruction allows the teacher more time to spend on instruction than on behavior management.	25	35	40	0
Whole group reading instruction eliminates "busy work".	25	45	25	05
Whole group reading instruction allows students to make connections and learn to support each other.	30	55	15	0
Whole group instruction enables each student to be an active participant in their classroom community.	30	50	15	05
Whole group reading instruction teaches children to interact and communicate more effectively with each other.	25	50	25	0
Whole group reading instruction encourages children to learn from each other.	27	68	05	0
Whole group reading instruction allows the teacher to set high expectations for the whole class.	35	24	29	12
Using whole group reading instruction eliminates labeling.	16	37	47	0
Whole group reading instruction builds students' self-concepts.	16	42	42	0
Whole group reading instruction narrows the gap between high and low ability groups.	15	45	35	05

Responses To Ability Grouping Method

One conclusion the writer has drawn is that fifty-eight to sixty-eight percent of the teachers surveyed agree that ability grouping raises students' attentiveness during reading and allows more individualized instruction time. Another fifty-five percent of the teachers agree that ability grouping allows the teacher to optimize students' learning. When asked if reading in small groups allows students more opportunities to ask and answer comprehensive questions, sixty-nine percent of those teachers surveyed agreed.

Another statement surveyed was "ability grouping for reading establishes an instructional level and pace appropriate for each student's performance level." Seventy-four percent of the teachers surveyed agree with this statement. A percentage of sixty-four was calculated for those teachers agreeing that ability grouping provides more on-task, direct instruction of reading skills. Sixty-three percent of the teachers agree that children are only grouped in an ability grouped classroom according to their level of ability.

Seventy-five percent of those surveyed disagree that using small groups to teach reading eliminates behavior problems. Forty-two percent also disagree that ability grouping offers students more feedback from the teacher on their progress. Sixty percent of those surveyed disagree with the statement that working with small groups of children enables the teacher to provide a more stimulating learning environment for the students.

Responses To Whole Group Reading Instruction

The writer also analyzed the results from the questionnaire related to whole group reading instruction.

Seventy percent of the teachers surveyed agree that whole group reading instruction eliminates "busy work". Sixty percent agree that whole group reading instruction narrows the gap between high and low ability groups. Seventy-five to eighty percent of those surveyed agree that whole group reading enables each student to be an active participant in his or her classroom community and that it teaches children to interact and communicate more effectively with each other. Eighty-five percent of them agree that whole group reading instruction allows students to make connections and learn to support each other. In addition, ninety-four percent agree that whole group reading instruction encourages the children to learn from each other.

When asked if whole group reading instruction allows the teacher to set higher expectations for the whole class fifty-nine percent of the teachers agreed. Sixty percent of those surveyed agree that whole group reading instruction allows the teacher more time to spend on instruction than on behavior management.

The statement, "whole group reading instruction eliminates labeling," was agreed upon by fifty-two percent of those surveyed.

Finally, fifty-eight percent of those surveyed agree that whole group reading instruction builds a student's self-concept.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The writer of this study was interested in the controversy as to which is the best method of reading instruction: whole group or ability grouping. Research in this area has a long history. Few educational practices have been scrutinized by researchers and reviewers for a longer period of time. (Kulik & Kulik, 1992)

However, very few conclusions have emerged. Some research supports ability grouping; other research supports whole group instruction. Many researchers are undecided as to which is the best method. The question is, "Which method is preferred by teachers for their students?"

The purpose of this study was to analyze the opinions of elementary school educators who have taught reading by using two different methods: whole group or ability grouping.

The thirty elementary educators were randomly chosen as subjects for this study. All of the subjects have taught using whole group and ability group reading instruction to teach reading in a public school system.

Each of the educators was asked to complete a Likert-type questionnaire that addressed both the ability group and whole group reading instruction method. The teachers were asked to respond to twenty statements, at their own discretion, as to whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements. The writer then analyzed the responses, completed the results and listed the percentages in two tables.

The writer received twenty completed questionnaires to analyze. The writer combined the strongly agreed and agreed percentage scores to complete the results. The writer also combined the disagreed and strongly disagreed percentage scores to form the calculations for the results.

The writer concluded that many of the teachers surveyed agree that ability grouping raises students' attentiveness during reading, allows more individualized instruction time, optimizes students' learning and gives more opportunities for the students to ask and answer comprehensive questions. The study also shows that teachers agree ability grouping establishes an instructional level and pace appropriate for each students' performance level.

Many of the teachers surveyed do not believe that ability grouping eliminates behavior problems, offers students more feedback from the teacher on their progress or it enables the teacher to provide a more stimulating learning environment for the students.

The results prove that a large percentage of those surveyed agree whole group instruction eliminates "busy work", narrows the gap between high and low ability groups, allows the teacher to set higher expectations for the whole class and enables the teacher to spend more time on instruction than on behavior management.

Those teachers surveyed also agreed that whole group reading instruction enables each student to be an active participant in his or her classroom community, teaches children to interact and communicate more effectively with each other and allows the students to make connections, support each other and learn from each other. The

teachers also agree that whole group reading instruction eliminates labeling and builds a student's self-concept.

Conclusions

The writer has concluded through this study that there are aspects of each method of reading instruction, ability group and whole group, that teachers prefer. The study showed high percentage scores supporting whole group instruction. However, many of the educators surveyed found positive aspects in each method of instruction.

The writer concludes that those teachers surveyed prefer whole group instruction to teach reading over ability grouping. The writer also concludes that the teachers support small heterogeneous groups of children learning together and supporting each other for reading instruction.

Recommendations

The writer recommends for practitioners interested in this study to conduct a survey in two separate school systems. The study should be conducted in a district that uses ability grouping to teach reading and in one that teaches reading through whole group instruction. The writer suggests that conducting the survey in two separate districts will offer a large discrepancy in percentage scores.

The writer recommends that practitioners use the results of this study to encourage them to survey the educators in their district. The writer recommends that school districts find out which method of reading instruction the educators prefer to use when teaching their students to read.

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